



THE TOP TWENTY FILMS

THAT I
WATCHED
FOR THE
FIRST TIME
THIS YEAR

2025 EDITION

FREE

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ADVENTURES IN MOVIE WATCHING BY JAKE HUDSON (LB: @GALLOW SIN HEAVEN)



Can you believe it? We've managed to survive another trip around the sun. The frail old man wearing last year's sash has been given the boot and replaced by a cherubic infant wearing this year's sash. We've finally arrived at the time where we get to collect and categorize all of the art that we loved from this past year. I love a "best of 2025" list but this year I decided to keep closer track of the films that I watched for the first time rather just the ones that were released this year. The main reason I chose to do it this way is because I haven't even seen all of the films from 2025 that I'd like to for one reason or another (*Peter Hujar's Day*, *No Other Choice*, *Resurrection*, *Pillion*, etc.) and my list would be woefully incomplete. Keeping track of my first time watches also allowed me to think back on all of the times I've been delighted and surprised by films over the year, and I have a lot of very fond memories attached to these viewings. If you'll indulge me, I'd like to tell you a bit about 20 films that made the biggest impression on me this year.

Peace be with you. See you at the movies.

- Jake :)



Questions? Comments? Disagreements? Go nuts!

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AI was not used in the making of this zine

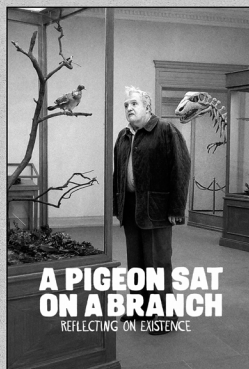
20. The Hunt (dir. Thomas Vinterberg)

We're starting out with a thorny one, gang. I was fully prepared for a film about someone who is falsely accused of sexual abuse to be somewhat cynical or flat out ignorant considering its premise, but I was surprised to find that it gracefully sidesteps the normal pitfalls that you would expect and extends a lot of compassion for every character on each side of the conflict. You see how Lucas has to tip-toe around while interacting with his neighbors and the police so that he doesn't implicate himself. You see how Klara contends with how a white lie grew into something much bigger than she could ever hope to handle on her own. You even get to see how Klara's father Theo deals with his fear and heartbreak over believing that Lucas could do such a thing to his family. This story is tragic because everyone who believed that Lucas is a predator isn't working with enough information to know that it's not true and Lucas doesn't have what they need to convince them otherwise. There is no singular victim in the story, and it would have been so easy for Thomas Vinterberg to make a one-note drama with a premise like this. He aimed for something better and he hit his mark.



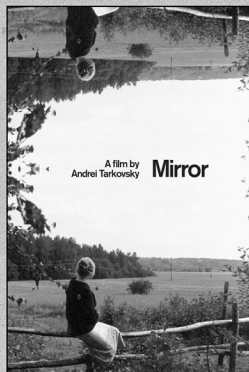
19. A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence (dir. Roy Andersson)

I haven't quite figured out why I'm not the biggest fan of Wes Anderson's cinematic style but I immediately took to Roy Andersson's filmography as I worked through most of his feature films this year. The through line between both directors is clear; meticulously framed static shots and odd characters that move and talk in an uncanny and stilted manner. There's a common joke that can be found in letterboxed reviews of Andersson's films that goes something like "Wes Anderson if he was depressed." Needless to say, I think that's exactly right. When it comes to the kind of story that this cinematic style is serving, I think that it works really well with Roy Andersson's stories of alienation and social malaise. A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence is a collection of vignettes of people failing to find connection. Unrequited love, missed connections, unacknowledged small talk, and bouts of sobbing that onlookers politely avert their gaze from. The way that Andersson frames these scenes highlights the physical distance between these characters as well as the invisible forces that keep them separated from one another. It's awfully hard to be a person in modern times, isn't it? Andersson certainly thinks so.



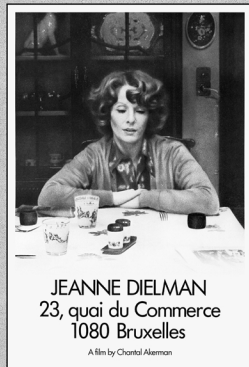
18. Mirror (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky)

I turned a corner with Tarkovsky this year. It's been a weight on my shoulders because, as silly as it sounds, I thought that I might be a fake cinephile for not really getting what he was all about when I watched *Stalker* and *The Sacrifice* for the first time. It's funny that one of his more experimental films would be the one to make me fall in love with his work. This film is remarkable in the way it represents the brain's ability to reconstruct memories and have them fold in on each other as we grow older. I'm only in my third decade on this earth and even I'm perplexed by how things I remembered so clearly in my younger years begin to fragment and mix with one another as they cross my mind. I can imagine that it will only feel stranger and sweeter as time goes on, and this is something that I think Tarkovsky understood very well. As a final note, I once heard a story about a janitor who succinctly explained what *Mirror* was about to a bunch of confused film critics that Tarkovsky was showing the film to so that she could get them all out of the theater faster. I don't have very many heroes, but that janitor is one of them.



17. Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (dir. Chantal Akerman)

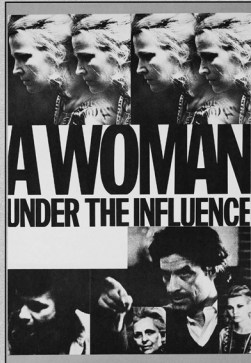
Chantal Akerman was one of the greatest to ever do it. Even with a meticulous cinematic style like hers, her films have a way of cutting straight to the beating heart. This film pulls off a trick that lesser directors would fumble instantly in the way it establishes and dismantles the day to day routines of a widowed housewife whose whole existence seems to be dedicated to maintaining her home. It's methodical to the point where, sometime around the two and a half hour mark, Jeanne forgets to shut off a light in a room after spending the entire runtime turning off the light in any room she leaves. It's such a small detail but by nature of how this film is constructed, it felt like a jumpscare. This moment and others like it land so hard because of the rhythm and structure of this film, and I am in awe of how Akerman pulled it off.





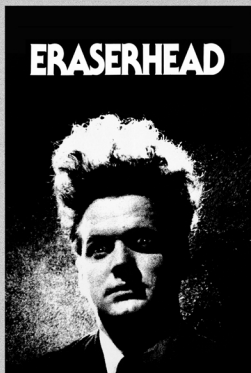
16. Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me (dir. David Lynch)

I knew this film was coming up in The Man From Another Place series presented by the Grand Rapids Film Society, and I remember moaning about how I might not "get it" since I still haven't seen Twin Peaks. A friend advised me that it could work as a prequel, so I went into the screening with an open mind. I knew enough about Twin Peaks through cultural osmosis to not be completely lost, but I was blissfully unaware of the devastating blow to my heart that this film would deliver. I've never seen another film that makes you feel complicit in the misery that unfolds for its main character. The fate of Laura Palmer is sadly not unique in our real world, and as an audience it feels like we're knowingly reopening a very deep wound. The barriers that normally separate the audience from the fiction of the film were simply not there, and this was by design. I remember walking out of Wealthy Theatre feeling strangely ashamed about what I had just seen. Still, I feel very strongly that films that impart negative emotions fit under the umbrella of what films are good for. For that reason, I feel confident saying that Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me is a masterpiece.



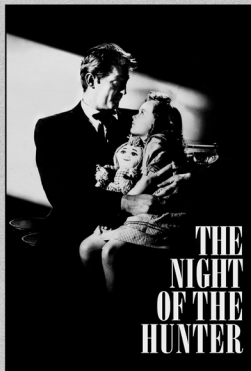
15. A Woman Under the Influence (dir. John Cassavetes)

Who in the whole wide world could watch Gena Rowlands act for even a second and not instantly fall in love with her? There's this thing that she can do with her eyebrows that conveys an impossibly deep and indescribable sadness, and I can't think of another actress who could pull that off like she does. I got to watch a bunch of films that individually star Gena Rowlands and Peter Falk this year, and it only makes sense that having them as the leads in this film would make it even greater than the sum of its parts. I have to tip my hat to John Cassavetes as well. The script and the camera work are out of this world. This film hits every single note it was going for perfectly. I haven't quite finished Cassavetes' filmography yet but it is within reach in the new year. As an aside, I love the scene where Peter Falk takes the kids to the beach and then shares a beer with them on the way home. I've been looking out for films that feature scenes of parents cracking open a cold one with their kids but I only saw one other movie this year that has a scene like that (see film #7 on this list).



14. Eraserhead (dir. David Lynch)

Simply by virtue of the Grand Rapids Film Society doing a retrospective of David Lynch's films, I've given a lot of thought to my personal ranking of his feature films this past year. By the end of the retrospective, four films were fighting for the top spot: Blue Velvet, Lost Highway, Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, and Eraserhead. I think I'd be satisfied with any of these films taking the top spot, but Eraserhead feels like the primordial gunk that the remainder of his work spawned from. This movie is evil and achieving that kind of vibe in your first feature film is no easy feat. Like, it's not hard to make a fucked up movie or a movie that's no fun to watch, but Eraserhead is sinister on a level that cannot simply be replicated or imitated. It's entirely original and it contains nearly everything that Lynch would expand upon throughout the rest of his career. It's so crazy that Lynch hated Philadelphia so much that he made a career defining debut film that retains its cult status to this day. RIP to a legend.

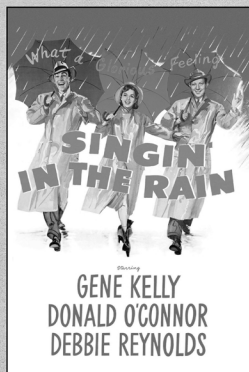


13. The Night of the Hunter (dir. Charles Laughton)

Has a black and white film ever looked better than this? There are certainly films that come very close (see the previous film on this list), but there's something about the inky blacks and the blinding whites in each frame of this film that feels perfectly executed to me. Better yet, it's paired with a truly frightening story with one of the greatest villainous performances I've ever seen in film. This is only speculation because I'm not exactly well versed in American films from the 1950s, but the structure and story of this film seems like it would have been really transgressive for the time. Harry Powell is a con artist who preys on the naivety of Christians in order to weasel his way into their community. Beyond that, the kids in this film are in real danger. I didn't feel certain that John and Pearl were going to make it out alive in the end. I fully bought into the danger and dread of every moment of this story. How is this the only film that Charles Laughton ever directed and HOW did he pull off that underwater scene? So fucking sick.

12. Singin' In The Rain (dir. Stanley Donen & Gene Kelly)

It shouldn't have been such a big surprise to me that a universally beloved film with some of the biggest actors of its time would turn out to be really really good. I went into this with very few expectations despite its reputation, and maybe that's why I found it so delightful (a similar experience that I would also have with film #10). Not only that, I was surprised by how god damn funny it was. Like, having to pause the film to catch my breath kind of funny. I loved Donald O'Connor in this and I love that he went so hard on Make 'Em Laugh that he nearly killed himself. It seems to me that everyone involved in the creation of this film was at the height of their creative powers and it made for a true masterpiece. I hope that I get a chance to see this on the big screen someday.



11. Cemetery Of Splendor (dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul)

I love the worlds that Apichatpong Weerasethakul creates. I love the way that time passes within them. I love the way that they sound. I love the way that his characters speak with one another and I love the things that they see in each other. It might be cliché to say that Cemetery of Splendor feels like poetry, but I have no other way to succinctly explain how this film operates. It brushes up against the boundaries of the medium and it makes you approach all of its sights and sounds differently. It's impressive how this film managed to be subdued and sweet yet unabashedly political. The final shot where the kids are playing soccer in between the overturned graves of dead kings that the government has been digging up is just so good. The final note of this film could be interpreted as hopeful or despairing. From where I stand at this moment in time, it reads as hopeful to me. Resigning ourselves to restless sleep is what totalitarian regimes require of us in order to march away from the future and into an infinite present. However, as long as we have the realm of dreams, anything is possible in the waking world.



10. 2001: A Space Odyssey (dir. Stanley Kubrick)

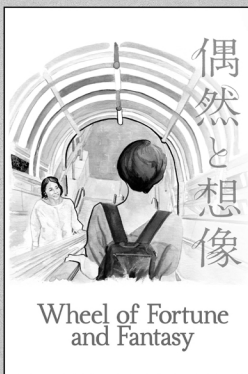
I don't know if this will make sense to anybody else, but I think that 2001: A Space Odyssey is to cinema as Paradise Lost is to literature. It feels primordial in a way, like it's working with the elements of creation whose original names have been lost to time. What really sold me on this film is the final 30 minutes or so, specifically from the scene where HAL 9000 gets shut down to the very end. I didn't know anything about the ending of this film, so I was primed to be fully crushed under the weight of its uncanny terror. Watching older and highly regarded films can feel like homework sometimes, but it's always a pleasure to find that a movie like this is exactly as good as everyone says it is. When I shuffled out of the screening at Wealthy Theatre, I had to sit in my car for a couple of minutes so that I could come back down to earth. Once I had, I felt a kind of pleasure because of how elated and frightened I was by this film. What I wouldn't give for the chance to see this film for the first time all over again.



9. Princess Mononoke (dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

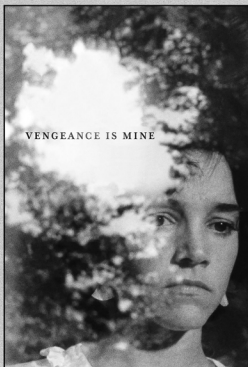
There was a short period of time when I didn't think that 4K restorations were that big of a deal. Generally speaking, I'm not too miffed if I have no choice but to watch a film in DVD quality but I've come to learn how much of a treat it is to see a 4K restoration on the big screen. I got to see Princess Mononoke in IMAX earlier this year and I consider myself very lucky to have seen it this way first. There's a shot that I was so moved by early on after Ashitaka has left his village in search of a cure for his curse where he's riding through the windswept grasslands of Japan. It felt like the animators were flexing as hard as they possibly could in this sequence and it moved me to tears. The story is wonderful too. I love Ashitaka and San's resolve to fight for an impossible ideal against impossible odds. I feel comfortable saying that this is my favorite Miyazaki joint.





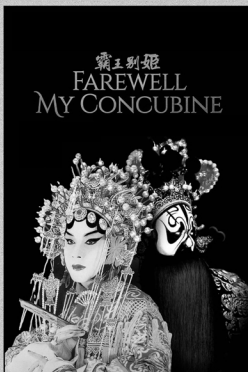
8. Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy (dir. Ryuske Hamaguchi)

I've seen a handful of people describe the way that Ryuske Hamaguchi writes a scene as a "magic trick," and I think this is a very apt way to put it. Conversations will begin, you get a feel for what's happening on the surface, and then the layers are ever so carefully peeled back to reveal that the characters have been talking about something else all along whether they realize it or not. The layers keep coming off until the heart of the scene is revealed, and it feels like magic every single time. I think Hamaguchi really understands the human tendency to erect walls around themselves in order to protect themselves from being misunderstood or hurt. He also knows the cost of keeping those walls up and what can be gained when we let them fall. It always feels like my heart grows an extra size whenever I watch one of Hamaguchi's films. I was immediately endeared to him and his writing when I watched Drive My Car for the first time, and this feeling was reaffirmed with Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy.



7. Vengeance Is Mine (dir. Michael Roemer)

Out of all of the films on this list, Vengeance Is Mine was without a doubt the biggest surprise of them all. It was briefly on the Criterion Channel and I threw it on because the title sounded cool. The first shot of the film features a woman practicing smiling while traveling on an airplane even though she is clearly distressed. My thoughts while watching this scene went something like this, "Oh, she's cute. Why does she look familiar? Oh shit, that's Brooke Adams!" I've been infatuated with her ever since I watched Days of Heaven for the first time and it was nice to see her again. It turns out that Vengeance Is Mine was a film that went unreleased for a long time and was only restored and released within the past few years. Michael Roemer's career as a director and writer was unappreciated in his time, and after watching all of his feature films this year I can confirm that he is criminally underrated. I'm inclined to not get into the plot details of this film and instead say that it's a film about choosing who you put your faith in to help heal your trauma. I've got it on Blu-ray and I will happily loan it to any local homies who want to check it out. I can't recommend it enough.



6. Farewell My Concubine (dir. Chen Kaige)

There is a very succinct review of this film that I keep coming back to from letterboxd user Kamaah. The review is just one sentence long; "Some people remain unloved their entire lives." Farewell My Concubine is a film about the tragedy of becoming what the world wanted you to be and not being able to find love where it was promised to you. Out of all of the fantastic film performances that I got to watch this year, Leslie Cheung's performance as Cheng Dieyi was among the most beguiling and haunting. As the film transitions from the bleak and cruel childhoods of the two main leads and into their adult lives as successful opera actors, there is so much despair brimming beneath the surface in every second that Leslie Cheung is on screen. I was also enthralled by how the drama between the leads is contrasted against the changing social and political climate of China in early to mid 20th century. This film was firing on all cylinders and its greatness is undeniable. As soon as the credits rolled, I knew this was going to be a new all-timer for me.



5. Exotica (dir. Atom Egoyan)

This film is entirely to blame for why I get Everybody Knows by Leonard Cohen stuck in my head at least once a week. I am so in love with how Atom Egoyan structures the stories in his film. He gives you the bare minimum to hold onto when introducing the characters and the circumstances that they find themselves in, but he does it in a way that makes you want to lean in closer and connect the dots. Moreover, he lets you make assumptions to fill in the context of what the characters are up to, and it sometimes leads you down a path of assuming the worst about them. When the pieces fall into place and you learn that what you assumed about these people is wrong, it doesn't feel antagonistic to the viewer. It's like Atom is saying "I know what you're thinking, but let me show you something better." I love the character of Francis, the way he enacts his ritual in order to get closer to the truth, and the mercy that Christina extends to him as he tries to put the pieces back together. I also love Elias Koteas playing a super sleazy strip club DJ and still finding a way to bring a level of real tenderness to his character. It's just so good.

4. Yi Yi (dir. Edward Yang)

Yi Yi is a film that has to be seen to be believed. It's a deeply compelling portrait of the changes you go through in different seasons of life complete with pitch perfect writing. I could continue to wax poetic about this film, but instead I'd just like to share a quote I love spoken by Yang-Yang as he's giving a speech to his grandmother at her funeral, "I think all the stuff I could tell you, you must already know. Otherwise, you wouldn't always tell me to 'Listen!' They all say you've gone away, but you didn't tell me where you went. I guess it's someplace you think I should know. But, Grandma, I know so little. Do you know what I want to do when I grow up? I want to tell people things they don't know. Show them stuff they haven't seen. It'll be so much fun! Perhaps one day, I'll find out where you've gone. If I do, can I tell everyone, and bring them to visit you?" Movies don't get much better than this, gang.



3. Portrait of a Lady on Fire (dir. Celine Sciamma)

The final two films on this list after this one were viewed on my living room TV, so this means we're finally at my favorite film that I got to see in theaters this year. There's a moment towards the end of this film (*spoilers!*) where Marianne is leaving the manor after saying goodbye to Heloise. It's clear that Marianne is avoiding the pain of leaving Heloise behind and is resigning herself to having their love exist only in memory. Heloise calls to Marianne as she's about to leave and says "turn around." As Marianne turns, we see Heloise for a split second and then the frame fades to black. This scene mirrors visions that Marianne has throughout the film the foretell the end of their love. All this is to say I gasped so hard at this scene that I nearly started coughing. I kept it together in that moment only to weep at the final scene when Marianne sees Heloise years later at a distance. When the credits rolled and the lights came up, I felt the urge to fall on my face in an eastern direction towards France to pay my respects to Celine Sciamma for making an incredible film. Like music, this is a film that I felt in my body before I fully understood it in my mind. I love this film to death and I hope that I get another chance to see it on the big screen somewhere down the line.



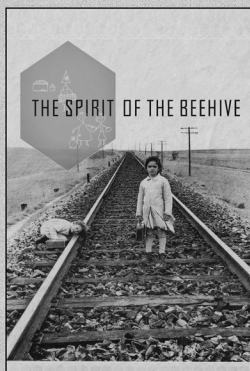
2. Three Colours: Red (dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski)

I thought about breaking my own rules and putting the entire Three Colours trilogy in this slot. I could have picked Three Colours: Blue because it stands on its own a little bit better than Red does. There are a couple of bits in Red that play off certain events in the other two films, including its incredible ending. Still, having viewed all three films I cannot deny that Three Colours: Red is my favorite. It's a perfect film both in form and function. It's wildly ambitious in terms of its narrative and cinematic structure and Kieslowski effortlessly hit his mark. Every little detail in this film relates back to one another in some way, and all it takes is Kieslowski gently pulling the strings to bring everything together in harmony. Irene Jacob and Jean-Louis Trintignant are both so incredible in their roles, and the way that their characters play off of each other makes their story greater than the sum of its parts. There's something tragic and poetic about Kieslowski passing away shortly after this film was released. It seems so clear to me that he was at the height of his creative powers with Three Colours: Red, and I don't know if it's better that this was his last film or if he needed more of a chance to expand on what he was so good at. It's not something that anyone on this side of the grave gets a say in, but I adore this film all the same.



1. The Spirit of the Beehive (dir. Victor Erice)

Did I make this zine just so that I can evangelize about The Spirit of the Beehive? It's more likely than you think! On the surface, the film is about a young girl named Ana living in a small Spanish town during the aftermath of the Spanish civil war and under the Francoist dictatorship. The new reality of post-war Spain weighs heavily on Ana's parents, but such concerns are out of frame in Ana's world. So much of The Spirit of the Beehive is concerned with Ana's interior life and how she attempts to make sense of the world around her. Her world is overflowing with wonder and possibility while her parents' world is colorless and grim. In a behind the scenes feature, the following insight is shared, "Ana's imagination reconstructs everything hidden from her and assigns inner meaning to everything she sees. Her ability to look, and especially to believe in what she sees, allows her to live and grow in a universe where language and communication seem forbidden." The Spirit of the Beehive gives me the courage to see the world in a different way even when it feels like the sky is falling every moment of every day. What would life be like if I were more curious about the secrets that everyday occurrences and objects hide behind the curtain, waiting to be discovered? What if I was brave enough to pierce the veil in order to find out? That's the kind of courage that Ana exemplifies, because she knows what will be gained is far greater than her fear. It's nice to be reminded that something can be greater than fear in the current moment. That is precisely what this film means to me.



"EVERYTHING IMAGINED IS SOMEWHERE OUT THERE..."